



МЛАДИНСКИ
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EDUCATIONAL
FORUM

Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Programme

Youth Perceptions
and Attitudes
on Migration



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This Advocacy Research Report is prepared by Migration and Brain Drain Working group of the Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Programme 2023 (RYLMP).

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The views in this document are the result of the desk research work, consultation meetings and mobility visits with stakeholders from the Western Balkans.

This project is supported by the Open Society Foundation, the Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Programme is a collaborative effort between the Center for Science and Innovation for Development (SCiDEV), the Center for Education Policy (CEP) in Serbia, and the Youth Educational Forum (YEF) in North Macedonia. The project partners on this program hold the copyright for this Advocacy Research Report.

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Executive Summary

Over the past decades, emigration from the Western Balkans has taken on impressive proportions. OECD figures (2022) indicate that more than half of Albania's population today lives outside of the country. It is worrisome that 71% of young people in the Western Balkan countries consider moving abroad, as the Balkan Barometer of Public Opinion 2023 shows, on a quest for better economic opportunities, education, security, and standards of living.

This policy paper aims to investigate the perceptions of young people living in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia that drive outward-oriented migration and from which sources these perceptions are mainly formed. To address the research questions, we employed a mixed-methods research approach including two focus groups conducted in each country to gather qualitative insights and facilitate in-depth discussions among participants and distributing a regional survey targeting young individuals aged 18-25 years living in these countries. The research was conducted on a sample of 182 young people (145 from the survey and 37 from the focus groups).

Findings reveal that economic prospects and professional opportunities play a significant role in motivating young individuals from Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia to migrate. They are driven by the pursuit of better living conditions and career growth, which they believe can be achieved more easily abroad. However, they are not blind to the challenges of migration, such as cultural adaptation and separation from family and friends. When asked about common channels for migration information, trust levels, and influence on decisions, participants often relied on educational institutions as the main source of information. However, they trusted and were influenced more by family, friends, and acquaintances abroad. These findings contributed to the identification of the average "Balkan Youth Dreamer" profile, so policymakers and stakeholders can tailor their actions according to the young people's aspirations and tendencies.

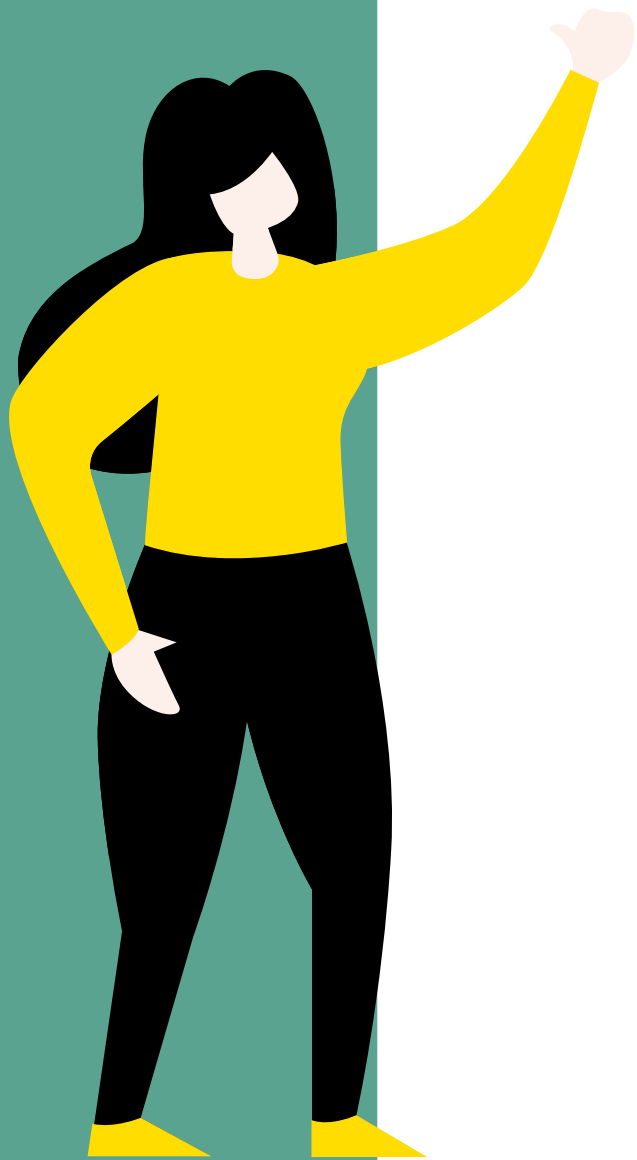
Finally, the policy paper provides concrete recommendations and actions for the three governments and respective institutions to follow and implement so that youth will not see migration as the "only option". Recognizing the importance of addressing the limitations of the current research on migration policies, it is strongly recommended that one of the institutions which has direct access to youth in each of the three countries (e.g., Ministry of Education) undertake a comprehensive survey at a national or regional representative scale. Ideally, this survey should be repeated periodically, such as annually or bi-annually, to ensure up-to-date and reliable data on migration trends and related policies and the data should be implemented in national action plans.

Other actions include:

- Increasing the number and accessibility of cultural and exchange programs for youth, aged 18-25 years old, to increase exposure towards a diversity of views and regions and to promote more informed attitudes towards migration.
- The ministries responsible for education should facilitate internship programs and improve legal norms for volunteering, ensuring easy access to such opportunities - e.g., bureau for development, career centers, etc.
- The ministries responsible for education can initiate advocacy campaigns on social media designed for the youth in the WB6 region. The campaign can feature important crafted messages based on the policy paper's research findings about the typical Balkan youth. The primary objective is to enhance awareness and comprehension of the viewpoints held by the young individuals of the region regarding migration.

List of Abbreviations

CEP	Center for Education Policy
E2E	Education 2 Employment
E4E	Education 4 Employment
INSTAT	Institute of Statistics (Albania)
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RYLMP	Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Programme
SCiDEV	Science & Innovation for Development
SMP	Skills Mobility Partnerships
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WB6	West Balkan 6 (countries)
YEF	Youth Educational Forum



1. Introduction

Migration, particularly youth migration, is a widespread phenomenon across the six Western Balkan countries (WB6). The rate of emigration from this region has been among the highest in Europe (Rantakainen, 2022). It is estimated that one-fifth of the WB6 population is currently living abroad. A 2021 study by the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw) points out that most migrants from WB6 countries are young (between 20 and 39 years of age) and have relatively high levels of education. This 'brain drain' will likely have adverse effects on the home countries' competitiveness, economic growth, and economic convergence in the long run (Rantakainen, 2022). The 2022 Balkan Barometer shows that 71% of young people in the Western Balkan countries are considering moving abroad (Regional Cooperation Council [RCC], 2022, p. 9). People's desires and reasons for wanting to live in another country are influenced by a mix of social, economic, and political factors that are all connected to one another. Previous research delves into the factors that influence the decision to migrate from one's home country - typically centered around economic considerations. As analyzed in the *"Labour Migration in the Western Balkans"* 2022 OECD report, despite making progress in improving economic and social prospects over the past decade, structural challenges and socio-economic hardships such as high unemployment and low wages, continue to incentivize emigration from the WB6 economies (Rantakainen, 2022).

Against such a backdrop, going beyond the push and pull factors that eventually influence migration decisions, this policy paper provides insights into the perceptions and opinions of young people in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia on the topic of migration through qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. To achieve this, the policy paper initially focuses on reviewing secondary data on youth migration in all three countries obtained from relevant organizations. Then, the situation in each of the three countries is examined in separate sections. Afterward, the methodology for data gathering and processing is explained, encompassing both the survey and focus groups' findings. A comprehensive analysis of all gathered information feeds into the design of an advocacy campaign, which will target young people aged 18-25 who wish to migrate, intending to raise the primary objective of enhancing their understanding regarding the significance of well-informed choices on migration. Lastly, this policy paper seeks to provide valuable recommendations for policymakers, organizations, and stakeholders to develop more informed and effective strategies for addressing youth migration and its potential challenges.

1.1. Albania

Albania has seen one of the world's largest contemporary migratory processes in terms of scale (as a proportion of the current population) and intensity of international migration since the beginning of the post-socialist transition in 1991 (Gëdeshi, 2021). Currently, more than 1.6 million Albanians, or more than half of the population, reside outside of Albania, according to INSTAT (Gëdeshi, 2021). In recent years, the country has witnessed a growing preference among young people and professionals to migrate to Western countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK. It is calculated that more than 40% of young people in Albania strongly desire to move abroad, and the majority of them intend to do so for good. Another 20% also have a moderate desire to migrate (Kamberi & Cela, 2019).

The 2022 Balkan Barometer (RCC, 2022) report shows that half of the Albanian people surveyed (not distinguishing persons by age) reported that they would consider living abroad. The main reasons for which young people wish to migrate continue to be linked with economic considerations. This reality has not changed since 2014 when the last survey was conducted. 56% of those who wish to leave state that the main reason is to seek better living standards. Another 18% specifically state that they are looking for better employment opportunities, while 17% want to receive a better education than what is offered at home. Other reasons, such as living in a different culture or moving closer to loved ones, are mentioned by no more than 1–2% of those surveyed (RCC, 2022).

1.2. North Macedonia

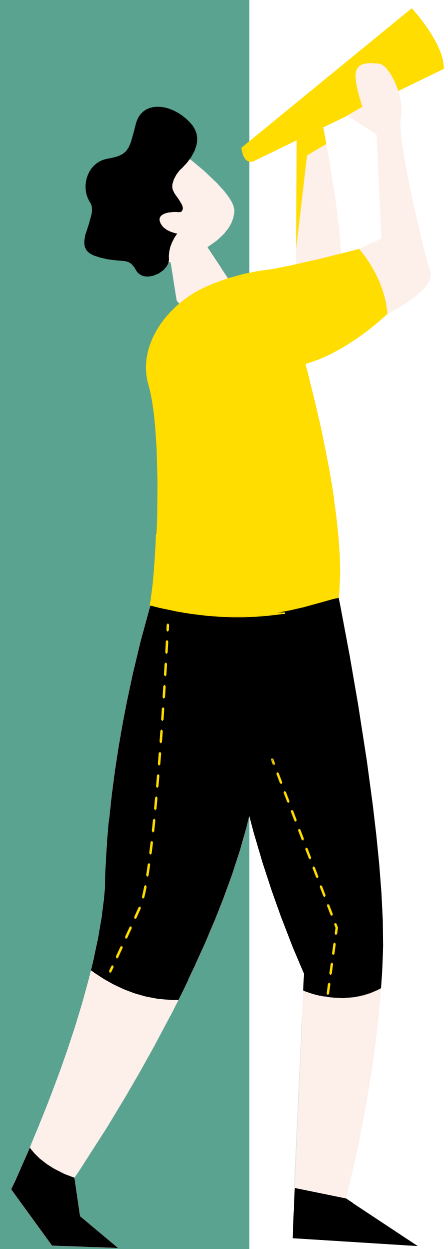
The history of migration from North Macedonia has been well documented, though with varying degrees of accuracy (Janeska et al., 2016; Janeska & Lozanoska, 2016; Markiewicz, 2006). Since its independence, it is estimated that North Macedonia has lost around 10 to 30% of its population (Aspen Institute Germany, 2020; Icoski, 2022) and has had the highest emigration rate of persons with tertiary education in the West Balkan Six countries in the period 1995-2005 – around 29% (Janeska et al., 2016). Combined with the decline of the general population of North Macedonia, these trends point to the fact that there has been a significant shrinkage of the working-age population.

Similarly, reports on youth migration present an equally worrying outlook. According to Topuzovska Latkovikj et al.(2019), every other young person reported having thought about or planned on leaving the country, with these levels being even higher with unemployed youth at around 80%. Economic conditions such as higher rates of youth unemployment (28.9% in 2023 according to the State Statistical Office) compared to the national average, as well as more educational opportunities to study abroad (such as Erasmus, Tempus, Erasmus Mundus, etc.), are some of the factors contributing to youth migration. Other reports concur (Rantakainen, 2022), stating that low economic outcomes and low wages create strong incentives for people to emigrate. In youth surveys on the topic (Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2019), the three most frequently reported reasons for migration are improvement in the standard of living, higher salaries, and groups leaving the country.

1.3. Serbia

In the context of Serbia, economic factors, including limited employment opportunities, low wages, and lack of career prospects, were found as key push factors contributing to youth migration from Serbia (Popadić et al., 2019). The percentage of young people who intend to emigrate is higher than the average in other countries covered by the regional survey “Youth Studies Southeast Europe 2018/2019” (Popadić et al., 2019). With a significant 75% of the youth expressing a desire to emigrate, Serbia stands out as the country in the region with the strongest inclination to move abroad (Popadić et al., 2019). Pessimism about the future and educational aspirations are linked to the desire to leave, which is stronger among those who are more open to the world, with higher educational aspirations, and people dissatisfied with themselves and their lives (Popadić et al., 2019). Aspirations for better education, career development, and improved quality of life were prominent pull factors attracting young individuals to migrate from Serbia (Šantić, 2020). Economic issues, political instability, and social pressures also drive migration. Young people in Serbia feel limited opportunities at home and often seek better prospects abroad (Šantić, 2020).

The study by the European Training Foundation showed migration’s positive and negative effects on human capital acquisition as young migrants acquired new skills and experiences abroad but faced challenges in utilizing their skills upon return (Arandarenko, 2021). The survey revealed that migration significantly impacts Serbia’s labor market. Emigration has led to high unemployment rates, particularly among the youth. The labor market outcomes are influenced by factors like human capital level, quality, and migration patterns.



2. An Overview of the Youth Perceptions of Migration in the Western Balkans

One of the obstacles that the authors faced at the very start of this policy paper was the limited prior research on youth perceptions of migration, especially on the information channels that are used to form these perceptions. While we acknowledge this gap, our research aims to shed light on the subject by answering the following research questions:

- What are the perceptions of youth (aged 18-25) on migration? By delving into the attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives of this demographic, we sought to gain a comprehensive understanding of their perceptions regarding migration, and the factors that 'push' people out of their countries, as well as the factors 'pulling' them to specific destination countries.
- Where do the youth from the three countries obtain information about migration? We aimed to investigate the sources from which young people acquire information about migration, such as educational institutions, social media, family, friends, or official channels.
- How does the source of information affect perceptions and migration? This question aimed to examine the influence of different information sources on the perceptions and decision-making processes of young individuals about migration.

A mixed-methods research approach was employed to address these research questions. Firstly, two focus groups were conducted in each country to gather qualitative insights and facilitate in-depth discussions among participants. These were followed by the distribution of an online survey targeting young individuals aged 18-25 years.

2.1. Approach and methods

The study utilized the same approach in the three countries. In each, two focus groups were conducted: one targeting high school seniors who are about to plan for the next steps in their future, and

one with university students who might provide a more diverse perspective. These focus groups allowed the exploration of the nuances and complexities of youth perceptions on migration. They were conducted from April to June 2023, either online or in person, depending on the availability of the participants and the circumstances of the authors. The minimum number of participants per focus group was five (5). The three main topics discussed were: i) personal experience of education and future aspirations, ii) factors affecting migration, and iii) consequences and solutions of migration. The questions were structured and translated into the local languages. The focus group guide can be found in the Annexes to this report.

To complement the focus group findings, an online survey was administered. The survey enabled the authors to collect a broader range of data, allowing for statistical analysis and identification of trends and patterns in youth perceptions of migration from our target population. For the recruitment of respondents, a mix of convenience and snowball sampling was used. The survey was shared through various communication channels, including by contacting professors and members of the staff in the institutions where the authors are involved, by asking student bodies such as student organizations and student assemblies to disseminate the survey with their members, as well as through the networks of the organizations running the Regional Youth Leadership Mobility Programme – YEF, CEP, and SCiDEV. The survey was active for 30 days during June 2023. Table 1 provides demographic information of the 145 participants who fully completed the survey.

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of the survey respondents

Demographic characteristics	Name	N
Nationality	Albanian	44
	Macedonian	45
	Serbian	56
Gender	F	100
	M	45
Highest educational level attained	Primary school	7
	High school	78
	Bachelors	40
	Masters	22
Employment status	Student	101
	Employed	34
	Unemployed	8
	Self-employed	2

Other demographic data that are not presented in the table relates to whether the participants were affiliated with any political party (N = 7) and in which field they studied or would want to study in the future after graduating from high school. For the latter, the classification was split into six broad umbrella fields – Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities, Engineering and Technology, Health Sciences, and Arts – with an option to input their field if it was not covered by the aforementioned selection. While for the political party affiliation, there was an insufficient number of responses to make any meaningful analyses, it was the opposite for the fields of study/work. The participants were almost equally distributed among the six fields. Further, all textual answers submitted by the participants were added to one of the six fields, as they could decidedly be put into a category following parsimonious logic. The rest of the survey was structured in three sections:

- I. The respondents' perspective of the future of their country, work prospects, general satisfaction with the quality of life, and the reasons they would stay in the country,
- II. Communication channels through which respondents get their information on migration, or how much they trust said channels and how much the participants think they are influenced by them,
- III. Respondents' desire to emigrate, the main reasons why, as well as whether they want to do so permanently or temporarily.

2.2. Merits and limits

While the research methodology offers valuable insights into the topic, it is important to acknowledge both its merits and limitations. By utilizing focus groups and surveys, a wide range of viewpoints were collected, including both qualitative (descriptive) and quantitative (numerical) data. The policy paper reached different youth groups across the three countries, particularly during the focus groups. However, one limitation is that this diversity in the focus groups did not result in the voicing of equally diverse views. More often than not participants' remarks were about general sentiments and seldom shared opposing views even when probing questions were asked. This uniformity of perspectives might indicate that either the participants had not given the topic a real thought and struggled to formulate and voice these ideas or were disengaged from the topic altogether.

The survey suffered from an extremely high attrition rate (78%), meaning that 4 out of every 5 persons who started to respond decided to abandon it after the first section. Therefore, due to the small number of participants and the way the data was collected, we cannot use these findings to accurately describe the feelings of all young people in the three countries. Nevertheless, when complemented with the focus group findings, responses provide valuable insights into how young people view migration, particularly in terms of information channels they use to form their opinions, as well as how much they trust and are influenced by said channels of information.



3. Findings and Analysis

3.1. The legal and institutional framework around migration

Migration in the three countries is governed by specialized strategies and legislative frameworks which are outlined further in this section. The main migration strategies of all WB6 economies except Serbia include objectives and specific policy measures to 1) address irregular migration; 2) support the socio-economic integration of immigrants; and 3) support the economic integration of returning migrants. The migration strategies in place in the three countries of this policy paper also envision attracting skilled immigrants to address labor market needs. The strategies of North Macedonia and Serbia include specific measures aimed at reducing emigration factors, i.e., the push factors. In contrast to other WB6 economies, the main migration strategy of Serbia (Economic migration strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2021-2027, 2020) does not address irregular migration, nor integrate immigrants or returnees under readmission agreements socio-economically. It instead concentrates on encouraging and supporting circular and return migration as well as on reducing emigration factors. It also focuses on benefitting from the diaspora for the economy's development, facilitated through an online platform called "**Returning Point**".

- Bilateral cooperation with the destination countries is an effective way of managing migration. Skills partnerships: A new model for migration collaboration

Migration in the Western Balkans creates competition for talent and skills shortages, affecting both origin and destination countries. To maximize the benefits of migration and skill investment, skills mobility partnerships (SMPs) have been implemented by Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has implemented various VET projects in the Western Balkans to increase youth employment. One example is the Education 2 Employment (E2E) and Education 4 Employment (E4E) program that supports labor market measures in Serbia and North Macedonia through career guidance and counseling and work-based learning to generate employment opportunities for youth.

In terms of current efforts, Albania has published the draft of The National Strategy on Diaspora and Migration 2018-2024, which includes a dedicate objective on encouraging talented young individuals abroad to return for professional careers. It also plans for scholarships to study abroad and experience exchange programs with a return commitment.

North Macedonia has embraced the Resolution on Migration Policy and Its Action Plan for 2021-2025 (Resolution on Migration Policy and Its Action Plan for 2021-2025, 2021). The main objectives of the resolution are to establish institutional foundations for a sustainable and comprehensive framework for managing both regular and irregular external migration, to advance the country's development. This framework encompasses five strategic areas: Establishing a supporting framework, gathering reliable and relevant data on external migration, managing regular migration, controlling and managing irregular migration, and fostering international partnerships and cooperation.

Meanwhile, Serbia is actively executing the Economic Migration Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2021-2027. The Serbian 'Economic Migration Strategy 2021-2027' aims to curb emigration, strengthen diaspora ties, and attract skilled foreigners. Specific objectives include enhancing data monitoring, improving living conditions, aligning education with industry needs, fostering diaspora cooperation, supporting circular migration, and refining internal migration governance. Target groups are the workforce, diaspora, returnees, and foreign-educated individuals. Indicators for success include reduced emigration, increased returnees and investments, and foreign labor influx. The strategy emphasizes action plans, acknowledges strengths like a diverse business environment, and addresses weaknesses such as regulation gaps, aiming to bolster Serbia's competitiveness and integration. Table 2 summarizes the main institutions involved in migration policy-making.

Table 2.
Main institutions involved in migration policymaking.
Further information can be found on the following links:
Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia

	Institutions in charge of migration management	Supporting institutions/agencies	Policy coordination
Albania	Ministry of Interior	Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs; Ministry of Finance and Economy; Ministry of Health and Social Protection; Ministry of Education and Sport; Institute of Statistics	Technical Secretariat on Migration; Technical Committee on Migration; Steering Group on Migration
North Macedonia	Ministry of Interior	Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ministry of Labour and Social Policy; Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative; State Statistical Office; Ministry of Education and Science; Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Economy; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Health; Secretariat for European Affairs; Emigration Agency	Inter-ministerial Group for Migration Policy
Serbia	Ministry of Interior	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ministry of Tourism and Youth; Ministry of Education; Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation; Ministry of Economy; Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government; Office of the Minister without portfolio in charge of the coordination of activities and measures in the area of relations of the Republic of Serbia with the Diaspora; Commissariat for Refugees and Migration	Coordination Body for Monitoring Flows in the Area of Economic Migration in the Republic of Serbia

3.2. Research findings

Considering the institutional frameworks from the three countries, the policy paper delves into the process by which young adults in the three nations develop their perceptions concerning migration, how they inform themselves about leaving their home countries, and what influences their desires to leave or stay, and most importantly, which channels of information they use to accomplish all of this.

3.2.1. Survey analysis

Firstly, it should be noted that demographic factors such as nationality, age, gender, and field of study did not differ vis-à-vis the general perceptions of migration. This suggests that young people across different demographics shared similar sentiments throughout the survey, consequently allowing us to interpret the forthcoming statistics for all respondents equally.

When asked about their outlook on both their personal future within their home country and the prospects of the nation itself, participants' responses regarding 'their own future' are almost equally split (52% overall hopeful and optimistic). However, more seem to think more pessimistically about 'the future of their native country' (only 40% were overall hopeful and optimistic). Not too different, the participants expressed generally lower satisfaction with their country's quality of life (54% overall were dissatisfied). An additional analysis based on these three themes showed that overall pessimism with both the 'personal future', as well as the 'country's future' statistically predicted the desire to emigrate. In other words, the more pessimistic the participants valued "the future of their home country" and "their future in the home country", the more inclined they were to entertain the idea of emigrating. Likewise, a similar pattern emerged when considering overall satisfaction with their home – the less content young people were with their home country, the more inclined they were towards emigration. As for their future career prospects, they were fairly hopeful about finding any job (74% of the positive responses), though notably less optimistic about securing a job they would find fulfilling (only 48%). Again, comparing the importance of "finding a job" versus "finding a satisfying job" in their home country, only the latter was able to statistically predict emigration desires. In essence, participants who felt less confident about finding a satisfying job were more likely to consider emigration.

Next, an exploration into the participants' inclination to migrate from their home countries - be it a temporary or permanent move - was undertaken, including the main reasons why they would do so. In most of the cases, the participants thought of emigrating from the country - 48% thought of leaving their country temporarily, while 24% permanently. On the other hand, while most participants reported having thought about leaving the country, the desire was almost equally divided, with a slight skew towards staying at home. More precisely, 55.9% reported having not much or no desire at all to emigrate.

In regard to the factors that guide the young people to leave the country or to remain in it, the findings from this report concur with previous research done on the topic. The main reasons for people wanting to emigrate concern low salaries (for 15% of the respondents), wanting to acquire professional experiences from abroad (13%), as well as a low standard of living and social and political instability (both constituting 10%). Inversely, when asked why they would choose to remain in their country, the top reasons were family ties (30%), followed by social ties (20%), with 14% mentioning a desire to contribute to the country's improvement.

Lastly, the channels of communication that young people use to inform themselves about migration and form their opinions on all of the above were explored - a topic which has been somewhat neglected from previous academic work and non-academic reporting. Among the ways young people inform themselves about migration, social media was the most frequently cited channel for 23% of the respondents, while 18% said that they turned to those living abroad for insights, 17% relied on classical media, and 16% looked to their friends. An intriguing insight from this data is that although social media was the main source of information, the most trusted and influential channels came from different sources. In this particular order, family, friends, and acquaintances living abroad were the three channels of information that were deemed most trustful and influential. These sentiments are a testament not only to the significance of personal connections, but also of the awareness that not everything that is posted on social media, and on the internet in general, can be taken for granted.

3.2.2. Summary of the Focus Group Discussions

Focus group observations add important nuances to the survey results. While there are some country-specific differences, overall, participants across focus groups prioritize practical learning education with an emphasis on employment prospects and life satisfaction. They provide a deeper context, illuminating the complex interplay of personal, familial, and societal factors that influence young people's decisions in each country. Participants also displayed a lack of desired subjects in the educational system. This suggests that there is a regional commonality in all the three Western Balkan countries. The importance of economic prospects and opportunities for employment in influencing young people from Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia to consider migrating is the regional characteristic highlighted by the poll. This common drive is a result of a larger regional tendency.

Participants in Albania emphasized the importance of practical learning and the pursuit of personal passions. This opinion was consistent with survey findings showing Albanian adolescents place high importance on practical education. Some individuals were discouraged from studying abroad because of strong family ties and concerns about adjusting to new cultures. This emphasis on familial ties corresponded with the survey's finding that family and social ties were important reasons for people to stay in their home country. Furthermore, family pressure was identified as a significant element influencing academic decisions, matching the survey's emphasis on family expectations as a crucial influencer of their choices.

In North Macedonia, focus group discussions indicated a lack of needed (relevant) subjects in the education system. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with this lack of availability, supporting the claim that a lack of desirable subjects impedes educational endeavors in the country. Focus discussion groups in Serbia revealed that some students choose career courses primarily on possible income rather than their preferences. This echoed the survey's finding that economic prospects and professional opportunities strongly influence migration decisions in Serbia.

Analyzing attitudes and identities in the three countries revealed complex patterns. Albanian participants emphasize practical learning and personal interests, seeking a balance between skill development and self-exploration. This is consistent with the survey's findings that they value employment prospects and life satisfaction. Limited access to desired subjects irritates North Macedonia, matching the survey's finding of subject availability as a key factor in migration considerations. Despite limited prospects, many Serbian

students prefer to stay, which agrees with the survey's result that a sizable proportion of Serbian students prefer to stay.

Finally, a thorough examination revealed the critical significance that economic possibilities and professional opportunities play in inspiring young people from Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia to consider migration. This link between aspirations and prospects is supported by survey data. Nonetheless, the level of understanding that emerged from the focus group talks sheds light on the emotional and practical complexities that drove their actions. While they are willing to take risks to achieve their goals, they consider the emotional and social consequences of relocation. This observation is consistent with the survey's nuanced categorization of elements influencing their decision-making. The conversations also emphasized the desire to return home after completing an education abroad, which is consistent with the survey's finding that participants want to positively contribute to their native country.

3.3. Profiling the “Balkan Youth Dreamer”

The analysis suggests the existence of a ‘prototypical persona’ that exemplifies the traits and attributes of a larger, younger demographic with a predisposition towards migration. This persona encapsulates the typical traits and dreams of the group of young people who are eager to explore new opportunities and move away from where they currently live. Below follows a short description of this persona:

Figure 1.
Profile of the typical ‘Balkan Youth Dreamer’

Gender: Non relevant

Nationality: Balkan (from one of the three countries studied)

Educational Level: Completed high school and considering further studies

Field of Work/Study: Undecided, exploring various options

Work Status: Unemployed, looking for opportunities

Background: This young individual was born and raised in the Western Balkans region. They have recently completed high school and are now at a crossroads, trying to figure out their next steps. They come from a close-knit family with strong family values and a supportive social network of friends and acquaintances. Their dream is to find a fulfilling job that aligns with their passions but lack the necessary work skills; they are also pragmatic and understand the importance of financial stability.

Motivations and Goals: An ambitious dreamer who desires to pursue a career that allows them to make a positive impact on the world. Passionate about various fields, such as arts, technology, and social issues, makes it challenging for them to settle on a specific career path. Above all, they want a job that brings them a sense of fulfillment and purpose. They believe that finding a job that aligns with their interests will lead to a happier life and overall satisfaction. This individual feels limited by the lack of professional opportunities and low salaries in their home country. Strong family ties and close friendships create a sense of attachment and responsibility towards their home country. These emotional connections often tug at their heartstrings when considering migration.

Challenges and Frustrations: They face frustration due to the limited professional opportunities and low salaries available in their country. They are aware that they might need to compromise on their dream job to secure financial stability. Even if they manage to find a job in their field of interest, they worry that it might be undervalued and lead to dissatisfaction and disillusionment.

This finding is relevant because it gives policymakers a better understanding of the average young citizen they should keep in mind when designing migration policy and strategies, as well as messaging addressed to youth.



4. Policy Recommendations and Actions

Highlighting the significance of implementing tailored migration strategies, especially aimed at the younger population, is essential to combat issues like population decline, workforce shortages, and the loss of skilled individuals.

This research plays a vital role in empowering policymakers with valuable information to refine policies and launch awareness campaigns that resonate with the youth. The goal is to motivate them to stay invested in their communities, playing an active role in driving a prosperous and sustainable tomorrow.

The results of this policy paper suggest several recommendations and actions that governmental institutions can take in short-term and long-term frames:

In short-term

- I. Based on the findings of this research, the ministries responsible for education and youth, and relevant agencies should start an advocacy campaign designed for the youth in the WB6 region. The campaign should feature important crafted messages based on the paper's research findings about the typical Balkan youth and utilize communication channels that capture the attention of the intended audience (such as social media). The primary objective is to enhance awareness of young individuals from the region regarding migration – the requirements, and challenges that accompany it - achieved through the presentation of diverse statements directly from the youth themselves.
- II. Additionally, the ministries responsible for internal and foreign affairs can collaborate to support youth from the region, living domestically or as part of the diaspora, with comprehensive information sheets that outline legal obligations and opportunities for young citizens residing abroad, such as guidelines for absentee voting and other relevant services, would empower them to remain engaged with their home country even from afar.

In long-term

- III. Recognizing the importance of addressing the limitations of the current research on migration policies, it is strongly recommended that institutions responsible for youth and migration issues in each of the three countries undertake a similar survey as the one administered by this policy paper

at a national or regional representative scale. Ideally, this survey should be repeated periodically, e.g., annually or bi-annually, to ensure up-to-date and reliable data on migration precautions and trends. The data should inform national action plans on (youth) migration prevention and all ensuing awareness and public information campaigns.

- IV. To increase exposure to diverse views and regions, reduce the 'the grass is greener on the other side' effect, and promote more informed attitudes towards migration the number and accessibility of cultural and exchange programs for youth, aged 18-25 years old, should be increased.
- V. Furthermore, the Migration Agency can play an instrumental role in facilitating the return of young expatriates by implementing targeted measures. The Migration Agency in North Macedonia could establish a dedicated department catering specifically to the needs of young returnees. This department would provide personalized assistance, guidance, and support to help them reintegrate into the local workforce and society seamlessly.
- VI. Recognizing the pivotal role of employment prospects in migration decisions, government action is essential to enhance the link between education and the labor market.
 - 1) The ministries responsible for education, labor and economic development should pioneer mentorship programs, pairing experienced professionals with the youth to guide career development and bridge generational gaps.
 - 2) These efforts, coupled with streamlined regulations for volunteering, will empower young individuals with practical experience and enriched academic knowledge. Such an integrated strategy ensures a workforce equipped for both success and contribution, mitigating challenges tied to migration and employment.

5. Conclusion

The idea and scope of this report was to investigate the challenges of youth migration and brain-drain in the three countries, upon which concrete policy and action proposals could be submitted. What previous reports and articles found, our findings confirmed that there is still a significant amount of young people who are either thinking about and/or are desiring to move abroad in search of greener pastures. Likewise, the respondents in this research express similar reasons for those ideations, namely lack of (fulfilling) job opportunities, worsening economic conditions, and expanding educational chances abroad. On the other hand, family and friends play a crucial role in making the overall decision: they are the primary reasons why the respondents want to stay in their home country, and likewise, they are the most trustworthy and influential source for migration information.

Furthermore, since the future of a thriving and vibrant society lies in the hands of its youth, it is imperative for governmental institutions to take decisive actions to inspire and retain their active contribution. Thus, to better advocate for any policies, the relevant state institutions should conduct regular surveys of the youth perceptions on their future prospects and migration sentiments, as well as preferences and expectations on the labor market, which can give a clearer picture of where the government can actively work to create fulfilling career opportunities.

Furthermore, since the social circles (family and friends) and social media are the most important channels of information regarding migration, programs could specifically target the youth and their parents through tailored and well-designed social media campaigns. Parent-teacher associations in schools can promote these campaigns in order to inform and influence young people in making better career choices. This means giving them both the opportunity to find work in their home country, as well as letting them get educated elsewhere but incentivizing them to come back and share their knowledge. That is why the ministries responsible for education should spearhead internship programs and simplify volunteering opportunities, providing young individuals with valuable real-world experiences that complement their academic knowledge.

Collaborative efforts between the ministries responsible for internal and foreign affairs can empower young citizens both at home and abroad, offering guidance on legal obligations and services to stay connected with their homeland. Finally, targeted measures of the Migration Agency could be a game-changer in facilitating the return of young professionals and experts, ensuring a seamless reintegration into the local workforce and society. Thus, circular migration will enable the countries to bring that knowledge and expertise back to the benefit of future generations. By pursuing these action, Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia can ignite the passion and potential of its youth, paving the way for a brighter and more prosperous future.

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Annex

1. Focus group guide

Target groups: high school seniors and university students

Age group: 18 to 25-year-olds

Topic 1: Personal experience of education and future aspirations

- What do you think about the education system and the education they have received so far? How do you rate it?
- What are your plans after high school/after university studies?
- Why do you want to continue higher education? What are the factors that influence your decision on this?
- How do you balance your personal aspirations and dreams with the expectations and pressures of society, family, or culture?
- Can you tell us what are some of the challenges you face in pursuing higher education?
- Have you ever thought of leaving your country to pursue education or employment opportunities abroad?

Topic 2: Factors affecting migration

- What are the main reasons why young people in Albania leave their country to emigrate abroad?
- How would you compare the opportunities for young people to pursue a job and professional interest within the country, compared to abroad?
- What are the advantages/disadvantages of moving abroad?
- How do young people perceive the role of family and community in their decision to emigrate and what impact does this have on their choices?

Topic 3: Consequences and solutions of migration

- How can youth help in education and awareness campaigns in order for young people to make more informed decisions about immigration and its long-term impact on their country and future generations?
- How can young people play a role in shaping the future of their country?

2. Survey Questionnaire

1. Age:
2. Gender:
 - a. F
 - b. M
 - c. Other
3. Country where you live:
 - a. Albania
 - b. North Macedonia
 - c. Serbia
4. What is the highest level of education you have obtained?
 - a. Primary school
 - b. Highschool
 - c. Bachelor's degree
 - d. Masters degree
5. Are you currently in formal education?
 - a. Not in formal education
 - b. Currently in high school
 - c. Currently in trade-school
 - d. Currently in bachelor's degree
 - e. Currently in master's degree
 - f. Currently in PhD
6. Field of (future) education: _____
7. What is your employment status?
 - a. Student
 - b. Unemployed
 - c. Employed
 - d. Self-employed
8. If employed, the field of employment: _____
9. Are you a member of a political party?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
10. If yes, which one? (presented with a list of parties currently in national parliaments or assemblies)

11. How do you feel about your future living in home country?
 - a. Very hopeful and optimistic
 - b. Somewhat hopeful and optimistic
 - c. Somewhat unhopeful and pessimistic
 - d. Very unhopeful and pessimistic
12. How do you feel about the future of your country?
 - a. Very hopeful and optimistic
 - b. Somewhat hopeful and optimistic
 - c. Somewhat unhopeful and pessimistic
 - d. Very unhopeful and pessimistic
13. How likely do you think it is that you will find a job in your home country in the next 2 years after graduation?
 - a. Very likely
 - b. Somewhat likely
 - c. Somewhat unlikely
 - d. Very unlikely
14. How likely do you think it is that you will find a job that is fulfilling in your home country in the next 2 years after graduation?
 - a. Very likely
 - b. Somewhat likely
 - c. Somewhat unlikely
 - d. Very unlikely
15. How satisfied are you with the quality of life in [ALB, MKD, and SRB]?
 - a. 1. Very unsatisfied
 - b. 2.
 - c. 3.
 - d. 4.
 - e. 5 Very satisfied
16. What are the main reasons why you would to stay in your home country? Select a maximum of 5 answers:
 - a. Family and relatives
 - b. Friends
 - c. Help country improve
 - d. Respect in community
 - e. Way of life

- f. Higher standard of living
 - g. Professional and econ safety
 - h. Job opportunity
 - i. Quality of edu
 - j. Professional advancement
 - k. Starting business
 - l. Sociopolitical stability
 - m. Something else. Please, explain:
17. Where do you typically get your information regarding migration?
- a. Friends
 - b. Family
 - c. People you know who live abroad
 - d. Social media
 - e. School/University
 - f. Embassies
 - g. Media
 - h. Social/Civic/Community events
 - i. Other:
18. How much do you trust these sources of information? On a scale from 1 to 4: completely, somewhat, very little, not at all:
- a. Trust in friends
 - b. Trust in family
 - c. Trust in people living abroad
 - d. Trust in social media
 - e. Trust in schools or universities
 - f. Trust in embassies
 - g. Trust in classical media
 - h. Trust in NGO, civil sector and organisations
19. How much do these sources of information influence your desire to migrate? On a scale from 1 to 4: completely, somewhat, very little, not at all:
- a. Influence by friends
 - b. Influence by family
 - c. Influence by people living abroad
 - d. Influence by social media
 - e. Influence by schools or universities

- f. Influence by embassies
 - g. Influence by classical media
 - h. Influence by NGO, civil sector and organisations
20. During the past 12 months, did you think about leaving your country, either temporarily or permanently?
- a. Yes, permanently
 - b. Yes, temporarily
 - c. No
21. On a scale from 1 to 4, how much do you desire to emigrate?
- a. Very much
 - b. Somewhat
 - c. Not much
 - d. Not at all
22. What are the reasons why you will/would emigrate from your country? Select a maximum of five answers:
- a. Low standard of living
 - b. Social and political instability
 - c. Escaping from an unfavorable situation
 - d. Few opportunities for starting my own business
 - e. Difficulties with finding a job
 - f. Limited opportunities to work specifically in my field
 - g. Low salaries
 - h. Seeking to improve educational qualifications
 - i. Acquiring professional experience
 - j. Being able to financially support my family
 - k. Moving together with partner/family
 - l. Other

